



Senate Information Office

201 Paul D. Coverdell Legislative Office Building
18 Capitol Square
Atlanta, Georgia 30334
404.656.0028 or outside the Atlanta area 800.282.5803

WEEKLY COLUMN

For Immediate Release:
March 31, 2006

WEEKLY COLUMN

For Information Contact:
Merri M. Brantley, Director
Jeremy Arie, Communications Specialist
jeremy.arie@senate.ga.gov
404.463.6834

Notes from the Georgia State Senate

General Assembly makes good on its promises for 2006

By Senator Bill Heath



It's a wrap! The General Assembly successfully completed another legislative session last week, as the gavel came down to close the 2006 session. In one of my earlier columns this year, I expressed to my constituents the goals of the Republican-led Senate for this session. We have continuously stated that we are here to improve education in Georgia, strengthen security at every level, promote the well-being of our families and protect the rights of private property owners.

When you consider the successful passage of several key pieces of legislation this year, I think it is clear now that we have achieved our stated goals. Let's take a quick look at the major legislation that we passed, which will enhance the lives of every Georgian.

Security

The most prominent piece of legislation concerning security in our State is Senate Bill 529, known as the *Georgia Security and Immigration Compliance Act*. Since the early 1990s, Georgia has seen an influx of illegal immigrants moving in to take jobs in the agriculture arena, the construction and landscaping industry, and other industries in Georgia. Many of these laborers are paid in cash and don't pay any taxes. One of the main provisions of the bill requires employers to register with the

federal work authorization program to verify the information of all new employees. Of course, any effort to deal with illegal aliens will be controversial, so I feel our work on the passage of this legislation has been historic. It's time for those who enter our state *illegally* to realize that what they are doing is very wrong.

HB 1059 puts into place the toughest and most restrictive sexual predator legislation in the nation. Our goal is to punish those who abuse our precious children, attack our wives, daughters and loved ones and prevent them from ever harming another person again. The bill increases penalties for certain sexual crimes to a minimum of 25 years imprisonment and in some cases, a maximum of life imprisonment. A 1,000-foot limit would apply to child care facilities, churches, schools, designated bus stops or any other area where minors congregate. The bill also includes several *Romeo and Juliet Clauses*, which would make some crimes misdemeanor offenses if the victim is between the ages of 13 and 16 and the defendant is no more than four years older and under 18 years old.

In addition to our work to curb illegal immigration, the General Assembly has also approved \$250,000 in the FY 06 budget to strengthen courthouse security, and we've included a seven-percent pay raise for state law enforcement officers in the FY 07 budget. These fiscal moves are crucial to the security of our State. Not only will they provide more safety to the general public, but the raises will help the families of our hard-working state troopers and prison employees who put their lives on the line every day.

Education

2006 has been one of the most important years for Georgia's education system in recent history. The General Assembly has approved class-size reductions in math, science, social studies and language arts classes in K-8 public schools with House Bill 1385. HB 1385 received the support of our education advocates, principals, administrators and others. In addition to the many pro-education bills passed in 2006, almost \$400 million is set to be appropriated in the Fiscal Year 07 budget for a variety of education-based programs, including pay raises for our teachers, Georgia's Pre-K program, gift cards for teachers to purchase classroom supplies and more. Also, more than \$350 million in construction bonds have been approved to help build schools and classrooms to address growing pains across the State. As we head further into the 21st century, I think Georgia's schools will advance even more and we will successfully shake off the unfair assumption that we are a low-ranking state for K-12 education.

Rights of Private Property Owners

A huge issue arose last year when a U.S. Supreme Court decision in June (Kelo v. City of New London, CT) struck hard at the heart of private property ownership rights. In essence, this ruling has

handed over broad powers to local governments, allowing the seizure of private property to create higher end uses that could result in higher tax revenues, additional economic opportunities or secondary public use benefits. HB 1313 is a bill we passed this year that will provide for the comprehensive revision of Georgia's eminent domain laws. The bill requires more notice to be provided to property owners that their property is subject to taking and public hearings must be held before proceeding with any taking under the power of eminent domain. The definitions of "blight" and "public use" have been strengthened so that local governments must meet a higher standard before taking a property they considered blighted or for what they determine to be public use. To enact this protection, a constitutional amendment is required. We authorized this amendment by passing House Resolution 1306. When you go to the polls in November, you will see the question asked to amend the constitution to prohibit the abuse of power of eminent domain.

This is just a sampling of the many great bills we've pushed for and been successful in passing this session. Other bills passed will lower the rate of high school drop-outs, allow citizens more leeway to defend themselves when they feel threatened by an attacker, provide an elective bible literature class in high schools and promote a pro-family environment in Georgia. Also, a recent announcement shows the State to be ahead of the national average in job growth with more than 183,000 jobs created since January 2003. I am proud of the work that we were able to do during the 2006 Session, but as always, our work does not end there. I am here for you year-round and I encourage you to contact me with your comments, suggestions and ideas. Thank you for your continued support.

#####

Sen. Bill Heath represents the 31st Senate District, which includes all of Haralson and Polk Counties and parts of Bartow and Paulding Counties. He may be reached at 404.463.1361, or by email at billheath@billheath.net.